

When God Appears Abusive

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[0 : 00] Let's just stand and I'll pray. Father, we thank you for your word. We pray today that you might help us learn from it and help us know how to please you and please empower us by your spirit that we might serve you for the glory of your son.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, I want to begin today's talk by showing you some photos and telling you some stories.

And as I do, I want you to think about what you see and hear. And I also want you to think about how you feel about what you see and hear, the sorts of things that you long for in the world.

As you see these photos and hear the stories, I want you to think who is ultimately responsible for these things and what do you think of those who are responsible for these things and these actions. So let's have a look at our first slide. Now, in this first slide, all of the slides are taken from the Second World War. The victims are all Jews.

[1 : 10] Now, I want to ask you, what do you feel as you see those images and what do you long for? Who do you think is ultimately responsible for these things? Second slide contains photos taken from the war in Iraq.

Now, again, what do you feel when you see those images? What do you long for? Who do you think is ultimately responsible for these things? And what do you think of the person or people who are ultimately responsible for them?

Third slide has photos that are unmistakable. They contain photos taken from the attacks on the United States in 2001. Again, what do you feel as you see the images?

What do you long for? What do you think about those ultimately responsible? And what do you think of those ultimately responsible? Friends, the fourth set of slides you will have to imagine for yourselves.

Imagine it in your brains, and we'll just move on to the blank slide from there. Imagine in your brain, it's an ancient city. Its name is Jerusalem. It is under siege.

[2 : 20] All the food has long gone. Water is scarce. The people are weak from hunger and thirst. Then the walls are breached.

And the Babylonian forces just swarm into the city. There is mass butchering of the population. All the normal atrocities of war occur. The Edomites, who were the brother nation to Judah, side with the Babylonians, are outside the city and round up people as they try to escape and hand them back to the Babylonians.

The king of Israel makes a break for it. He is captured. His sons are killed before his eyes, and then his own eyes are gouged out. Friends, as you imagine all of this, let me ask you again.

What do you feel? What do you long for? And who do you think is ultimately responsible? What do you think of those who are ultimately responsible? Well, the ancient Israelites remembered these things like that, and they felt very, very deeply.

And they had ready answers. You see, underneath it all, they felt that in the end, God was responsible. Those feelings are exposed in the two chapters of Lamentations that we are going to look at.

[3 : 38] And as we look at them, I want us to think about what we do when we have the feelings that they had about God. You see, at some time in our lives, we probably will.

And even if we don't, we will come across others who have such views about God. And Lamentations will help us to deal with our own feelings and with the feelings of those that we meet. So let's get started. I want you to open up in the book of Lamentations. And I seem to remember it was 1,200 and... 800. There was an eight somewhere. 819.

Thank you. Now, to begin, let me tell you how we're going to deal with these chapters. We're not going to have time to look at every verse. So what I'm going to do is ask three questions of every chapter.

I'm going to ask where the focus of the chapter is, what sort of emotions are being expressed, and what sort of response is being required. So let's have a look at chapter one with that in view.

[4 : 38] What is the focus of this chapter? Just take a quick run through it. The very first verses show it, in my view, the focus is on the city of Jerusalem, portrayed as a victimized woman.

After all, it's verse one says, she was once a princess among the nations, but now she is a widow. Worse than that, she's now a slave. But not only is she affected, her children are also affected.

Verse five says, her children have gone into exile. And in verse six, we're told that her grand princes, or her grand princes are portrayed as weaklings that flee before their pursuers.

In verse seven, we hear that she is without help, and that her enemies mock her and laugh at her.

And in verses eight and nine, she is portrayed as stripped bare, and whose menstrual uncleanness has defiled her clothes.

In verse 11, she sees herself as despised. In verse 13, she is desolate. The picture is unrelenting through this chapter. Five times we are told, there is none to comfort her.

[5 : 47] The nation that was wooed by God in the wilderness back in the book of Exodus, wooed by God as his elect wife, is now a desolate widow bereft of her husband.

Here is a woman reduced to nothing. All dignity is gone, all glory vanquished, all hope dissipated. So that's the focus of this chapter. Jerusalem, the victimized woman.

Now let's ask ourselves, what emotions are present in this chapter? And I want you to listen to some verses as I read them, or follow them with me. I'm reading from a slightly different translation, I think.

Name the emotions in your mind as I read, or as you read these verses. First is verse two. Bitterly, she weeps at night. Tears are upon her cheeks.

Among all her lovers, there is none to comfort her, and her friends have betrayed her. They have become her enemies. Verse six. Oh, sorry, verse 16. This is why I weep, and my eyes overflow with tears.

[6 : 50] No one is near to comfort me. No one to restore my spirit. My children are destitute, because the enemy has prevailed. Verse 20. See, O Lord, how distressed I am.

I am in torment within, and in my heart, I am disturbed. Verses 21 to 22. People have heard my groaning, but there is none to comfort me.

All my enemies have heard of my distress. They rejoice at what you have done. May you bring the day you have announced, so that they may become like me. Let all their wickedness come before you.

Deal with them as you've dealt with me, because of all my sins. My groans are many, and my heart is faint. So, friends, what emotions did you notice? For herself, she feels deep grief, no agony at her situation.

Toward God, there are hints of anger, because he is regarded as being the one ultimately responsible. And toward the conquerors, there is a deep desire for revenge.

[7 : 57] Grief, agony, anger, desire for revenge, these are the dominant emotions and responses that flow through this chapter. But let's move on to my next heading, which is the response to the situation, in the situation, and her emotions.

The response that stands out is the one in verse 18. Can you see it there? Look at it. She says, well, the prophet says, the Lord is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command.

She says it. Can you see what's going on here? Jerusalem, the widow, is inconsolably grief-stricken. She knows that God is behind what has happened, but she also knows a deeper truth.

She knows that God has acted because she sinned against him. So, in some sense, this has happened because of her sin. And she acknowledges he's in the right. He is righteous. He is in the right.

This is because of what I have done, in some sense. She acknowledges her sin. So, there it is, chapter one in outline. Now, let's move to chapter two. Let's see how the focus changes.

[9 : 02] In chapter one, the focus was on Jerusalem, the victimized woman. In chapter two, the focus shifts to God. And God is presented, and I hope you'll excuse my use of the word, but he is

presented in some ways, I think, as an abuser of his people.

You might think that's very strong language. You might think I'm going beyond the passage, but I want you to listen to the language of the passage. I'm going to read key lines from the first nine verses.

Verse one, Verse two, Without pity, the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob.

In his wrath, he has torn down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah. Verse three, In fierce anger, he has cut up off every horn of Israel.

He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. Verse four, Like an enemy, he has strung his bow. His right hand is ready.

[10:05] Like a foe, he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye. He has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of the daughter of Zion. Verse five, The Lord is like an enemy.

He has destroyed, he has swallowed up Israel. Verse seven, The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary. Verse nine, Her gates have sunk to the ground.

Their bars he has broken and destroyed. Her king, her princes are exiled among the nations. The law is no more and her prophets no longer find visions of the Lord. Friends, can you hear what is being said?

The enemy of God's people in these verses is not said to be Babylon, but the enemy of God's people is said to be the Lord himself. God has covered Jerusalem with the cloud of his anger. And the people are saying, and he has not remembered mercy. He has behaved like an enemy warrior, destroying the people, devastating their stronghold, dethroning her rulers and leaders and denuding her of the prophetic voice.

[11:10] You see, the accusation right or wrong. Is this that God has gone gone over the top in his anger. Israel is in effect, you see, accusing God of being somewhat abusive.

Now, let me ask you what emotions you hear here. Did you feel the emotion of these verses? Yes, I read them to you. We had hints of anger in chapter one, but here in chapter two, anger has moved into the forefront.

God is said to be angry with his people, but we also get the sense that the poet and the people are angry with God. The emotions here are very raw.

They are deep. You see, here is a people expressing to God, frankly and honestly, what they feel. Their raw emotions. They are bewildered people.

They are in deep anger and agony. And in their raw emotion, they are voicing their protest. Even though, remember back in chapter one, they said the Lord was right for judging them.

[12:22] Now let's turn to our third heading here. Let's look at response. And the response is very clear. If they're feeling like that, then there is an appropriate response, isn't there? And that appropriate response is to take their anger, their complaint to God.

And that's what happens in the second half of the chapter. Look at verses 18 to 20. The hearts of the people cry to the Lord. O wall of the daughter of Zion.

Let your tears flow like a river day and night. Give yourself no relief. Your eyes, no rest. Arise, cry out in the night as the watches of the night begin.

Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint from hunger at the head of every street. Look, O Lord, and consider whom have you ever treated like this?

Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for? And these things happened, we know, in fortresses under siege. Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?

[13:31] Now, there are the first two chapters of lamentations. I want you to go back though and with me notice something else. I want you to notice how the prophet acts in all of this.

In the first half of chapter one, and then again in verse 17, he observes in the third person. That is, he looks at what has happened and simply recounts it.

However, in the second half of the chapter, he identifies with the people, lines himself up with them, puts himself in their shoes and speaks for them. That is, he carries their words and he allows the whole community to express it.

In chapter two, we see a shift again. In the first half of the chapter, he is the objective observer. He looks on, he recounts it. However, as we hear what he says, we begin to think, oh, he's not that objective.

His feelings creep through. And then he expresses his grief in verse 11 and describes how his eyes fail from weep for weeping.

[14 : 38] He is in torment. His heart is poured out on the ground because his people are destroyed. In other words, here he is, he's observing his people. And he identifies with them and he weeps with them and for them.

And then in verse 13, there's a further shift. He wonders what on earth he can do to help. And in verses 18 and 19, he offers the help of a prophet by urging the people of God to take their complaint to their source, to the source.

He urges them to let their tears flow before God. And before him, pour out their hearts like water in the presence of their God.

You see, the prophet's not just a passive observer in all of this. He moves from observer to speaker for them, to companion with them, to fellow complainant with them. And friends, there's a summary of these two chapters.

What I'd like to do is to think through how we can take these chapters on board for ourselves. And I want to do this by talking about feeling bad about God.

[15 : 44] You see, what these passages tell us is that what many is what many of the Psalms tell us. And that is sometimes some people feel bad about God.

And I want you to notice what they do when they feel bad about God. They take their feelings to him and they bring them to him. And what's more, God hears them and he allows them to put them into poetry.

And he allows them to sing songs together about it. Something that we are no longer bold enough to do. You see, he doesn't censor their songs.

He allows their songs even to be put into the Bible so we can read them and identify with them ourselves. And in doing all of this, what is God saying?

He's saying it is okay to express your feelings to God. It is even okay if your feelings are those of anger. Now, let me say, before I give you a blank check in this matter, perhaps we should think about whether being Christian changes all of this.

[16 : 54] Well, let's think about it. Can we as Christians be angry with God? Let's think it through. First, the place to go is to the center of our faith as Christians.

The center of our faith is a person, isn't it? And a deed that this person did. The center of our faith there, for in some sense, is the cross on which Christ died.

For on the cross, God proclaims beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loves us. We know he loves us because there he allows his son to die on our behalf.

He shows his love in the death of his son for us. But the cross does more than this. On the cross, God deals with his anger so that we don't have to face it.

On the cross, he takes his anger upon himself, as it were, into his own being. Unlike God's ancient people, therefore, we no longer have to face God's anger at sin.

[17 : 51] We no longer have to be in the place where Jerusalem was, where Israel was, where they needed to face God's anger. And so our prominent emotion toward God is not anger, but thanksgiving and praise.

However, there is more to say here, you see, we live in a world where bad things still happen to good people, don't they? And so we know in that world that bad things happen.

But we also know that God controls all things. And so sometimes things are not going to make sense, are they? Because good things are going to happen to, the bad things are going to happen to good people.

And when things don't make sense, it is entirely right to go to God and tell him. But is it right to be angry with him?

Well, I wonder if I could put it this way for us. Given what we know about God in Jesus, it is probably not right to be angry with God, for he has given us overwhelmingly of his love.

[19 : 02] We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loves us. However, I need to say that that's not all to say about the subject. I do need to say it's probably not right to be angry with God.

But it is probably, if I can put it this way, it is probably not right to be angry with God, given what we know about him. But, I think that I should also say, that if you are angry with God, then it is not right, not to tell him.

Can I say that again? I don't think it is right to be angry with God. However, if you are angry with God, I think it would be wrong, not to tell him.

And let me tell you, in churches, I come across people who have become embittered, toward God, and have not been game to tell him. And that bitterness has rotted in the very core of their being, and made them bitter, angry people.

Now friends, it is probably wrong to be angry with God. But if you are, don't hide it. Do what they do in scripture. Bring it to God and tell him. It would be wrong not to tell him.

[20 : 14] That's what the Psalms and Lamentations tell us. They tell us God is our God. God does love us. We are safe with him. But he wants us to talk with him about, to him about everything.

And he even wants us to talk to him when we're, when we're feeling the very deepest and hardest of emotions. No matter what our feelings are, we ought to bring them to God.

For he wants us. He wants us to tell him. However, there's one more thing I want to do before I finish this morning. See, each one of us encounters friends who are in grief, don't we?

And we are often called upon to help them. And I think these passages today give us some insight as to how to help friends in the deepest of human emotions.

Let me quickly tell you what they teach us. First, when dealing with people in grief, do what these passages do. Acknowledge sin where it's present.

[21 : 14] That is, put blame where it is to be put. Although, if I might say this, be very careful when you do it. If sin has been part of the cause, don't water it down, but choose your moment.

The second thing to learn from this passage is to allow emotional expressions of real feelings without condemnation. You see, God does not condemn his people in lamentations for expressing their real feelings.

Yet I hear Christians condemning other Christians for doing exactly that. Now friends, God doesn't condemn his people for bringing their feelings to him.

They may be wrong. God may not have been their enemy, just the righteous judge, but he doesn't condemn them for expressing their feelings before him.

And he won't condemn us as well. And therefore we, as his people, ought not to be too quick. So allow people to express to you and to God what they are feeling.

[22 : 16] The third thing is to learn from the prophet. I wonder if you remember what he did. He looked at what happened and he told it as it was. He identified with the people.

He put their shoes on and he spoke for them. And he felt their grief and he wept with those who wept. And then he helped them by telling them, go and tell God about it.

And he helped them actually do it. He gave words to them to do it. So when you're helping people in grief, don't just observe. Be a speaker for those in grief.

Be a companion. Suffer with them. Help them to come to God with their grief. Bring their grief to God yourself in your prayers. And lastly, let me urge you to point toward Jesus.

Don't allow people to wallow in their grief and their anger. They have a, if they are his, they have a God who loves them. Point them to this God.

[23 : 23] By pointing them to what he's done in his son, Jesus on the cross. Point people to God. By pointing them toward Jesus. And tell them they can find comfort there.

And know that God's love overwhelms anything else they might have felt from his hand. Let us pray. Father, we thank you that you did not spare your son.

from the cross. But you did allow him to go to cross as a demonstration, both of your justice and of your enormous love for us.

Thank you, Father, that because of Jesus, we don't have to face your anger. At the depth of our sin. For we have forgiveness because of him.

Father, please help us to grieve with those who grieve, to weep with those who weep. To help those who feel as though they're experiencing bad things from your hand.

[24 : 33] Help us to learn from the book of Lamentations in this, we pray. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.